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Rep. Hughes

Milwaukee shows Muskegon the way to get Mississippi River barges into Lake Michigan port

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MUSKEGON, MI – The idea of transporting non-hazardous bulk cargo on river barges from Muskegon to Chicago and down the Mississippi River system is nothing new.

But few have heard of such a river barge system this far north in Lake Michigan as the head of the Lansing-based Michigan Argi-Business Association Jim Byrum suggests a river-barge terminal in the Port of Muskegon.

Actually, the U.S. Coast Guard has established federal regulations allowing for what is called "limited service domestic voyage load lines for river barges on Lake Michigan" for Muskegon since August 1996. That is when the Coast Guard opened up the possibility of Mississippi River barges coming into Lake Michigan to St. Joseph and Muskegon. Milwaukee already received such consideration as far back as 1992.

Of the three ports – Milwaukee, St. Joseph and Muskegon – only operators in Wisconsin have pursued river barge traffic, according to federal officials. The route between Milwaukee and Chicago is 95 miles long, 80 miles to St. Joseph but 157 miles to Muskegon, federal officials calculate.

As West Michigan economic developers and those in the agricultural industry explore a river barge terminal **on Muskegon Lake**, the federal regulations are in place that could make such a service a reality, according to Brian Patrick, spokesman for U.S. Rep. Bill Huizenga's Congressional office.

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"This is something that interested parties can do on their own," said Patrick, press secretary for Huizenga, R-Zeeland. According to federal regulations published in November 2010, anyone interested in the St. Joseph or Muskegon river barge routes can apply for Lake Michigan "loan lines" with the American Bureau of Shipping Americas in Houston.

Without specific regulatory permission to move river barges between Muskegon and Burns Harbor, Ind. just south of Chicago, loads of grain out of Muskegon would have to be put on Great Lakes-certified ships and taken to the Chicago-area port for transfer to barges, federal officials say.

Such a requirement would be cost prohibitive, according to Phil Andrie, president of Andrie Specialized – a Muskegon-based marine transportation company interested in the river barge issue.

A Muskegon river barge operator would likely have to go through the same regulatory hoops that were navigated by the Port of Milwaukee back in 1992. Lake Express ferry President Ken Szallai was director of the Port of Milwaukee at the time that community had a need for links to the inland river barge system through Burns Harbor, just south of Chicago.



Ken Szallai

Since 1992, limited numbers of river barges – about 35 annually since the regulations have been in place – have moved between Milwaukee and Chicago. This has not been a huge portion of the 3-4 million tons of materials handled by the Port of Milwaukee every year but providing bulk river barge capabilities is important for the port, said Betty Nowak, the Port of Milwaukee's marketing director.

For the most part, Milwaukee-based barge traffic has handled grain from the Nidera Grain Co. and specialty cargo such as large machinery and equipment, she said.

"Some of our manufacturers in the Milwaukee area to even get a job need to have the ability to ship by barge," Nowak said.

To continue regulatory approval for the Milwaukee to Chicago river barge route, those in Wisconsin created a "risk assessment" committee of operators, port directors, the Coast Guard and the ABS. The group established continued operating procedures to get the barges safely from port to port on Lake Michigan.

Some of the Milwaukee-to-Chicago river-barge rules cemented in a 2010 Coast Guard regulation include:

- Barges need to be less than 10 years old and be unmanned as they are towed no more than three at a time.
- Barges and their tugboats must stay within five miles of shore and be able to enter harbors of refuge during heavy weather.
- The dry cargo "hopper" barges cannot carry any liquid nor any hazardous materials.
- The "freeboard" – how far the barge sticks up out of the water – has to be at least a minimum amount.
- Barges cannot operate under U.S. Weather Service "small craft advisories," which are issued with winds greater than 28 miles an hour and waves more than four feet tall.

Patrick said the barge operation restrictions are designed to keep the cargo and shippers safe and materials out of the water. Even still, federal officials reported that three barges heading south out of Milwaukee on Aug. 7, 2003 ran into heavy weather as one barge was sunk while the other two were able to be towed into Waukegan, Wis. for shelter.

"One of the problems that we are going to have on this side of the lake is that we have rougher weather to contend with," Andrie said.

The prevailing westerly winds whip up much higher waves on the Michigan coastline as Wisconsin has high bluffs and is usually a lee shore with the westerly winds, which keeps waves lower during high winds, Szallai said.

"For us in Milwaukee, the river barge traffic was bonus business," Szallai said. "But the weather will be more of an issue on your side of the lake and the routes are longer.

"To go all the way to the Gulf Coast, it is going to depend on the river barge owners," Szallai continued. "It will all depend upon the weather, economics and time. River barge traffic will not be a life changer for Muskegon."

*Dave Alexander covers business and local government for MLive/Muskegon Chronicle. Email him at dalexan1@mlive.com and follow him on **Facebook** and **Twitter**.*

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Coast Guard denies group's proposal for river-barge route from Mississippi River system to Muskegon

MilwaukeePort5

Coal is being loaded onto a river barge in Milwaukee. Photo: Port of Milwaukee (*Courtesy Photo | Port of Milwaukee*)

Brandon Champion | bchampion@mlive.com By Brandon Champion | bchampion@mlive.com

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on April 22, 2015 at 1:54 PM

MUSKEGON, MI – A year and a half after it was initially proposed, the U.S. Coast Guard has made its ruling on a proposed river barge route to Muskegon.

Michigan Agri-Business Association President Jim Byrum confirmed April 22 that the Coast Guard has denied the **Lansing-based organization's petition** to allow barges from the Mississippi River system to travel on Lake Michigan along the western shore of Michigan.

"We're extraordinarily disappointed," Byrum said. "But frankly, we're a trade association and the real losers in this are the citizens of Muskegon and the surrounding areas. There are many businesses that would have embraced the barge opportunity. I'm sure there will be efforts to fill the void in the transportation infrastructure that exists on west side, unfortunately, it's not going to be water born."

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The MABA's proposal was similar to the situation permitted between Calumet, Ill. and Burns Harbor, Ill., and between Calumet and Milwaukee, but the Coast Guard found some "significant differences," according to its report.

The reasons for denying the proposal include a history of more severe weather on the eastern side of Lake Michigan, the lack of ports of refuge on the West coast of Michigan and the lack of quantified potential economic benefits.

The Coast Guard also considered comments made during a 90-day comment period. Twenty-three of the 92 total comments opposed the barge route to Muskegon, citing concerns about the catastrophic environmental impact cargo lost into Lake Michigan would have.

Other opposing comments expressed concern that the route would cause the spread of Asian carp and/or other invasive species from the Mississippi River system. The volatile weather on the east side of Lake Michigan was also a sticking point for many, according to the report.

"I think they hung their hat on safety," Byrum said. "We've always embraced safety as a major issue from the start. The biggest challenge is they talk about three-barge towing that we had never suggested as an option. I've expressed to the Coast Guard my disappointment that we didn't have the opportunity to react to some of their concerns. Perhaps we could have pooled resources that could have helped them make a more comprehensive decision."

The immediate impact on Muskegon could be large. Combined with the closing of the B.C. Cobb plant in April of 2016, the lack of tonnage to the Port of Muskegon could mean the Army Corps of Engineers could stop dredging the port.

The Army Corps of Engineers has a freight tonnage threshold, with harbors over 1 million tons annually classified as a high-use commercial harbors, **qualifying them for dredging.**

It's not an end-all-be-all classification however; funding for dredging could still be provided if the Port of Muskegon fell under the million-ton threshold. Special legislation is also a possibility.

Byrum said MABA doesn't have immediate plans to fight the decision, but will be "taking a deep breath" to explore options and talk with supporters. He thanked U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, U.S. Rep. Bill Huizenga and U.S. Rep. Fred Upton for their support throughout the process.

Brandon Champion covers arts and entertainment, business, sports and weather for MLive Muskegon Chronicle. Email him at bchampion@mlive.com and follow him on Twitter @BrandonThaChamp.

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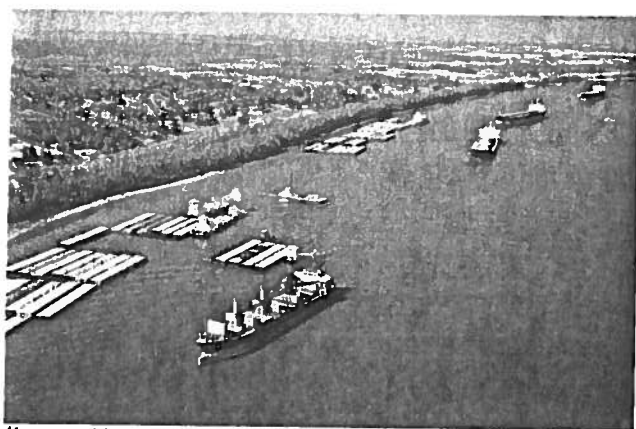
No river barge traffic to travel to Muskegon port

By [LINDSEY SMITH \(/PEOPLE/LINDSEY-SMITH\)](#) • APR 23, 2015

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Barge and ship traffic transport export cargo on the Mississippi River in the Port of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA on Sept. 9, 2005.

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The U.S. Coast Guard is denying a request to allow barge traffic from entering the deep water port in Muskegon. It says it's not safe enough and there are not enough potential economic benefits.

The flat-bottomed boats are already allowed to go to ports in Indiana and Milwaukee.

Michigan's Agri-Business Association President Jim Byrum says it would be cheaper and more efficient to ship imported fertilizer to West Michigan farms, rather than putting it in on a truck or train in Chicago.

“Barges would’ve provided them a new, more economical, or faster and economical way to bring the product in. Not being able to access that technology suggests that we’re going to be looking at some other things,” Byrum said.

Byrum says railways or roads need to be improved to keep importing fertilizer at competitive rates.

“We’re disappointed for the customers that could’ve used the service and we’re disappointed frankly for the Port of Muskegon,” he said.

The port will lose a lot of business when a coal plant in Muskegon shuts down next year.

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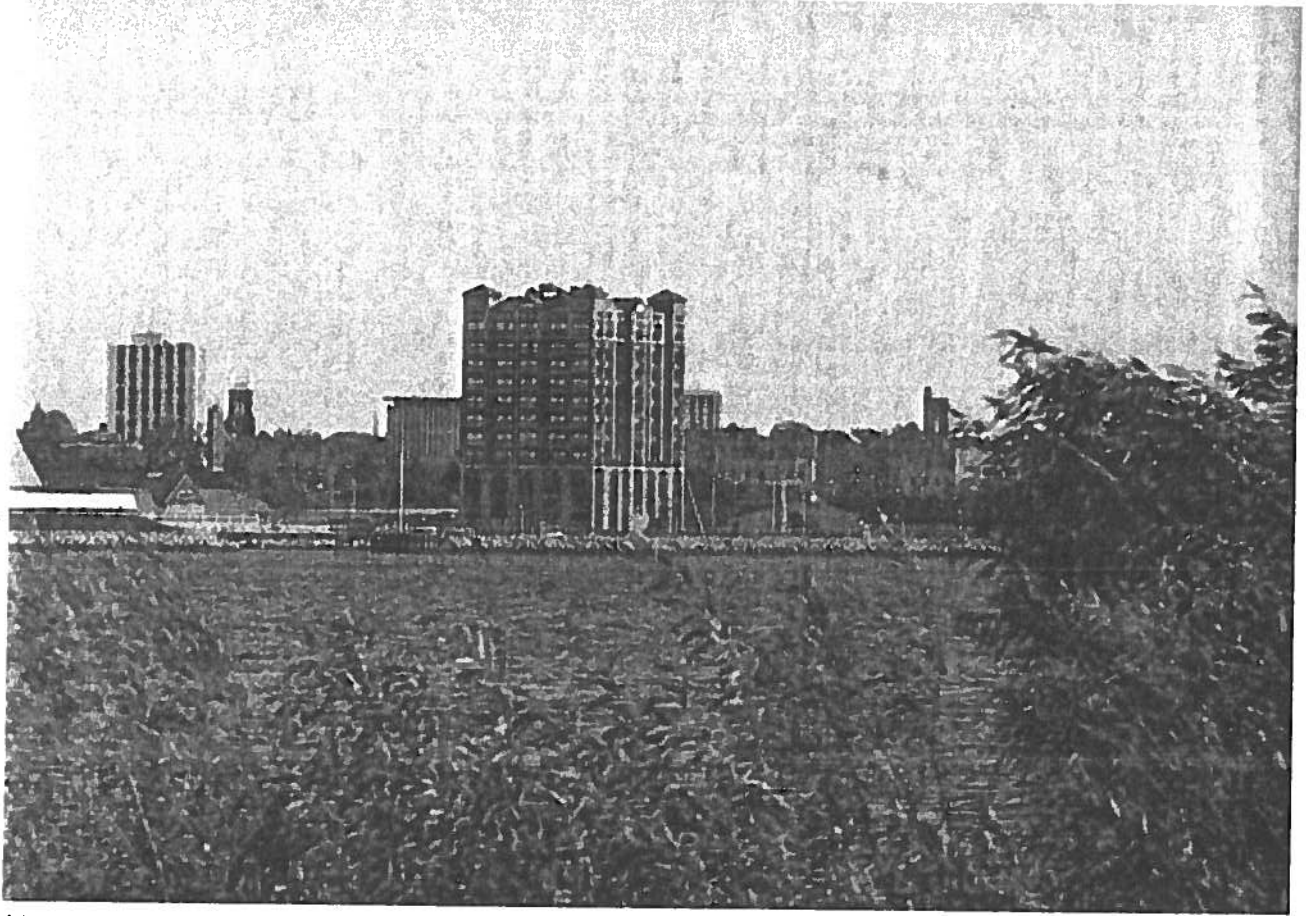
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